

## Spring migration of raptors and some other species in western Uganda

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The following account collects together scattered observations on diurnal migrants, mainly raptors, seen during a journey through western Uganda, 13 February–10 March 1990. The information obtained during this period, together with a review of the comments in Britton (1980), demonstrates the importance of Uganda for passage migrants.

There was no sign of visible migration during 13–25 February, spent mainly in the Impenetrable (Bwindi) Forest (1°00S, 29°40E) and Kibale Forest Reserve (0°30N, 30°25E). On 26 February, en route from Fort Portal to Bwamba (0°50N, 30°30E) round the northern end (c. 0°49N, 30°16E) of the Rwenzori Mountains, Black Kites *Milvus migrans* were flying northwards. At 10:00 hrs 125 birds flying along the eastern side of the mountains gathered in a thermal and drifted off towards Lake Albert. Nearby on the following morning ten more rose from the bush on the first thermals of the day, and also moved away northwards.

From 27 February to 5 March there was no sign of migration over the forest in Bwamba on the western side of the mountains. On the return journey on 5 March, as soon as the above site at the northern end of the mountains was reached, many Eurasian Swifts *Apus apus* were streaming down through the foothills from the south and heading out over the plain towards the lake. Next day >50 Eurasian Swifts flew north at 0°46N, 30°47E near Katoke at 72 km ENE of Fort Portal, and >20 Black Kites flew north at a point 3 km beyond. From here north to Masindi there were many, sometimes a great many, Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* drifting leisurely north and 25 more Black Kites drifted north in a thermal 27 km north of Masindi at 1°49N, 31°42E.

No particular watch was possible from below the forest canopy in Budongo on 7–8 March, although many Sand Martins were seen flying north. From open woodland in Budongo Forest at 1°43N, 31°34E on 9 March a rather distant movement flying NNE of Black Kites and Steppe Buzzards *Buteo buteo vulpinus* (called simply "Buzzard" in the remainder of this paper) was seen at 11:30 hrs, and 181 birds were counted in 15 min. Shortly afterwards the main body of this movement was located and it continued unabated until at least 15:30 hrs, after which it slowly decreased until by 16:36 hrs there were only occasional birds. Certainly during this period of over 4–4½-h of passage thousands of birds, and probably tens of thousands, were involved. At one time when the numbers passing were not considered to be greater than in the hour on each side, at least 1000 raptors were visible at once. Progress was in the normal manner for migrating raptors—leisurely rising in a thermal, followed by a long and fast descending glide to a concentration of birds rising in the next thermal. Flight height was difficult to assess, but very few birds were below c. 100 m, and most were near the limit of visibility to the naked eye, extending beyond to be visible only through x10 binoculars. Birds were seen passing through or behind the scattered clouds, and it was judged that the higher birds could have been over 3000 m above ground level (here at 1250 m). The great majority were Buzzards, with only a few Black Kites, and two or three larger birds, flying very high and flashing some white below, may have been Short-toed Eagles *Circaetus gallicus*. Earlier in the day, when there were rather more

Black Kites, these were flying NE/ESE, whereas the Buzzards were all flying NNE. By moving our point of observation slightly in the afternoon we may have encountered the more concentrated Buzzard migration, and it seemed that the kites were on a somewhat divergent track.

Next day, 10 March, at a few kilometres ESE of Masindi, very many Eurasian Swifts and many Alpine Swifts *Apus melba* were moving north and concentrating over a lake and marshland; then, at 09:30 hrs, at 26 km SE (1°36'N, 31°57'E) raptors began to rise out of the light woodland, and 10 min later there was suddenly a large uprising over a wide area of hundreds of raptors of several species, but notably Buzzards, with hundreds of Eurasian Bee-eaters *Merops apiaster* and several Abdim's Storks *Ciconia abdimii*. As the rising birds merged with others from adjoining areas, all settled down into a NNW flight direction. From periodic checks we estimated that for every 100 Buzzards, there were 20 Black Kites, five Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina* and four Steppe Eagles *A. nipalensis*. There was one large dark eagle, not certainly identified, possibly an Imperial *A. heliaca*, but we were not confident of our ability to identify this species, nor that we could separate all *A. pomarina* and *nipalensis*.

Further south-east along the road no more raptors were seen for the rest of the day. Flocks of 150 and 400 Abdim's Storks flew NE at 42 and 53 km from Masindi, and at the latter site hundreds of Eurasian Swifts were flying NNW. Near Nakasongola, Eurasian Bee-eaters flew north and there were >1000 Sand Martins near Kokoge.

## Discussion

It is an established fact (Britton 1980) that several species of Palaearctic diurnal migrant pass through Uganda regularly in large numbers, and probably on well-established flight routes year after year. It is remarkable that there is an almost complete dearth of systematic observations of these events. It is becoming increasingly important to study these movements in detail throughout the full extent of each species' migration in order to obtain an indication of population levels and changes, dates of major movements, and to map migration routes and overwintering areas. Information of this sort is required for devising conservation strategies when dealing with migrant species. For example, it might be a total waste of effort to give full protection to a species in both its breeding and non-breeding range if some (perhaps small) vital link in its migration route disappears. Such intermediate areas may be ones with a seasonally rich local supply of easily available food (such as the seasonal emergence of alate termites), or large areas of woodland essential for resting and roosting purposes. Large areas of such habitat can disappear, for example, in agricultural development schemes, or through other changes in land-use.

Much information of the kind required can be obtained by gradually building up casual observations over the years to provide eventually a composite picture. For other reasons it is important that such observations should be gathered together, or at least made accessible. Already data exist to work out for many Eurasian species an outline of their journey to and from breeding areas to winter quarters in Africa, and the routes they traverse. Obviously the many gaps in our knowledge of these journeys need to be investigated, and with the aid of casual observations, many can be.

Looking at the species alluded to above in the light of the comments on their status in Uganda by Britton (1980) it is found that Abdim's Storks, numerous in Uganda, almost entirely breed further north, spend the non-breeding season in southern Africa, and pass

through the country on their return north in February–May. Our records of large flocks on 10 March conform with this pattern. Our doubtful records of Short-toed Eagles are not supported by previous records by Britton in Uganda, of which there are only two, and there is no previous record in Uganda for the Imperial Eagle doubtfully recorded by us.

Steppe Eagles, according to Britton, are common winter visitors and passage migrants although much less common in Uganda than in Kenya and Tanzania. They were in much smaller numbers in 1990 than Black Kites and Buzzards, and their main passage may be further east. Our rather more frequently seen Lesser Spotted Eagles on 10 March may have been early migrants, for the only regular spring passage mentioned by Britton in Uganda is from the western Rift and Rwenzori National Park in April, although for March there is evidence for northward passage in areas to the south of Lake Victoria.

Although noted by Britton as being sometimes numerous on spring passage in Uganda, no previous well-defined flight route for Buzzards seems to have been identified. From the evidence of observations made further south he presumed that there is a northerly passage each side of Lake Victoria. If this is the case, the two streams may come together in northern Uganda, and this view is supported by the flight direction of the many birds at Budongo being to the NNE whereas the many seen east of Masindi were flying NNW. Intertropical migrant Black Kites *M. m. parasitus* are described by Britton as arriving in August–October “in flocks of hundreds or thousands”, and most depart by March after completion of breeding. Our birds in March were presumably part of this return flight, and its nature suggests that the birds were concentrated in narrow streams.

There is always difficulty in distinguishing migrating swifts from others involved in feeding or local ‘weather’ movements. Probably most of those seen in March 1990 were on passage, and their occurrences were sometimes, but not always, concentrated in streams. Swift passage frequently occurs in association with migrating raptors, for example *Apus pacificus* with *Accipiter* spp. and *Pernis* in Indonesia (Ash in prep.), where concentration along a narrow front is adopted under conditions where a broad-front movement might appear to be equally effective. Britton (1980) mentions that passage in western Uganda may be heavier in spring, in mid February to early April, than in autumn. Alpine Swift movements are more difficult to interpret in Uganda owing to the presence of three races, two of which are resident, and one Palaearctic migrant. Breeding birds travel very long distances to feed, and presumably may do so in flocks. Large numbers (1000 d<sup>-1</sup>) flying north in April over an area north of Masindi, not far from where we saw many on 10 March, have been thought to be returning Palaearctic birds (Britton 1980).

Bee-eater passage tends to be on a broad front, often very high, and occasionally, perhaps fortuitously, is associated with other species. Our birds were almost certainly on passage, although Britton mentions that very small numbers overwinter in SW Uganda, and that passage occurs in late March through to early May. Movements of Sand Martins are also difficult to interpret because of their habits of forming roaming feeding flocks, and massing in large social roosts. Britton refers to them in Uganda as being locally abundant winter visitors, and on passage mainly in late March through early May in spring. It was not established whether the birds we saw were on active passage, or merely on feeding flights.

The main interest of the present observations is to indicate the scale of migration in Uganda of certain raptors, notably Buzzards, Black Kites, Steppe Eagles and Lesser Spotted Eagles, and in particular in pointing out that much of this migration may be overlooked because of the high altitude at which it takes place. In identifying the flight lines used by these birds, it should be possible to develop a suitable technique for monitoring population levels from year to year.

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### References

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